**The Haymarket Riot Remembered**

DEBBIE ELLIOTT, host:

In downtown Chicago, at the otherwise ordinary intersection of Des Plaines and Randolph, stands a brick colored statue with men on a hay wagon. The figure towering at the top is gesturing to an invisible crowd. The monument marks the site of the Haymarket Riot, a labor rally 120 years ago that ended in mayhem. Someone in the crowd tossed a bomb into a nearby line of police. The officers opened fire and when it was over, seven policemen and at least three protestors were dead.

The incident sparked the nation's first Red Scare. The events of May 4, 1886 are the subject of a new book, Death in the Haymarket, by historian James Green. I asked him what Chicago was like in 1886.

Mr. JAMES GREEN (Author, Death in the Haymarket): Well, Chicago was the workshop of the world, the wonder of the Second Industrial Revolution. It was also an immigrant city. A majority of the workers there were born in Europe. And it was a city that had a violent history. There was a uprising of railroad workers in 1877 that was put down very violently. The police force was highly armed, and people were expecting trouble because there was also a revolutionary element in the labor movement there, led by anarchists.

In March and April of 1886, a wave of protest began on behalf of the eight-hour day, and there were many strikes, and on May 3rd, at the McCormick Reaper Works, this is a giant farm implement plant, there was a lockout, and a riot began. The Chicago police came, shot some people. Two or at least three workers were shot. And then the following night, the anarchists called a protest rally against what they called police brutality in the Haymarket Square on Randolph Street.

ELLIOTT: Two of the leading voices of the movement were August Spies, a German immigrant, and Albert Parsons, a former confederate soldier? This sounds like a pretty motley crew.

Mr. GREEN: It's a strange group of people, given where they came from and the fact that they came to Chicago without any idea that they would ever end up being anarchists, especially Parsons, who grew up on a ranch in Texas, and he volunteered as a young man for the Confederate Cavalry. But after the war, he came back to East Texas and was a radical supporter of black rights in Texas, and this was a very violent area at the time. So when he came to Chicago, he had already had a lot of experience in social and political struggles.

ELLIOTT: And Mr. Spies?

Mr. GREEN: Spies was a young man on the make, very highly read. He grew up in the forests of Germany. He had a pretty privileged life. But when he came to America and traveled around, he saw a lot of things that he found very disturbing, particularly the killing of 30 people, workers, during the 1877 railroad strike. That had a big impact on him, and he was a very successful organizer and publisher and speaker in this very, very large German community that was predominantly working class.

ELLIOTT: So let's get now to what happened on the night of May 4, 1886. Spies, Parsons and other speakers are climbing up on this hay wagon. They're addressing the crowd. The Chicago police are watching nearby, and everything appears peaceful. Even the mayor calls it a tame meeting. What goes wrong?

Mr. GREEN: Well, the company of police approach the wagon, and the captain ordered the speaker to disburse, and he argued and said but we are peaceful, and he said never mind, you have to go, and so they, he climbed down from the wagon. The speakers were leaving, and at that point someone, and to this day, we don't know who it was, threw the bomb that caused such havoc, and a police riot broke out.

Naturally, the police were totally unprepared for this, and they all had guns and started shooting, and some of them were probably wounded and killed by, quote, "friendly fire," unquote, and that was the Haymarket Riot, and the anarchists were indicted for this crime, the Crime of the Century.

ELLIOTT: Now, James Green, you write that the hunt for the anarchists responsible for this turned into a frenzy right thereafter. Something like 200 people were arrested?

Mr. GREEN: Right. People were paralyzed with fear, and the police had, you know, really license to act and round up everybody they suspected, all immigrants except for Parsons. And you know, civil liberties went out the window. Homes were raided without search warrants. People were held incommunicado and with complete public support. I mean, people wanted these anarchists, suspected anarchists, rounded up and put on trial.

ELLIOTT: So eventually, eight of them were brought to trial, including Spies and Parsons, but what's interesting is that none of them were charged with actually throwing the bomb.

Mr. GREEN: They were charged with being accessories to murder and charged with being parties of a conspiracy that had been hatched a few nights before with, presumably, with the bomber present. The evidence of this, however, was very flimsy, and their defense lawyers, and later the governor of Illinois, thought they were really being tried for what they had said in their speeches more than for what they had done. It was almost as though, even if they didn't have the bomb, someone had to pay for this crime.

ELLIOTT: Now, the defendants didn't really help themselves on the witness stand. Take Albert Parsons, for example, tell us about his defense.

Mr. GREEN: Well, they were, you could only say militant in their response to these charges, and Parsons even went so far as to continue to justify the use of dynamite in the social struggle. He called it the great equalizer, that powerless people didn't have armies and guns but they had dynamite. So he was not a man who was begging for mercy, and this was, some might say, a fool-hearty act, and yet they were already playing, I think, to their place in history.

ELLIOTT: Some of the defendants were eventually pardoned, but four of them, August Spies, Albert Parsons, George Engel, and Adolph Fischer, went to the gallows. What was the reaction to these hangings?

Mr. GREEN: Well, the immigrants who were very much involved in propelling this militant movement, this visionary movement, were very intimidated. You know, the Haymarket trial was a show trial. The hangings were an indication of what would happen to you if you said the things the anarchists said and if you opposed the state and the police. There was a reaction in the legislature. An eight-hour day was outlawed.

It was a very repressive period, and almost immediately, a sense set in that maybe some mistake had been made, and certainly this happened in the immigrant communities and in the labor movement where people began to say that a great injustice had been done, and the fact that it was immigrants made it seem even more serious to people who were new to the United States and hoping that this was a place where the jury trial system really worked well and there was liberty and justice for all.

ELLIOTT: James Green teaches history at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. His book is called Death in the Haymarket. Thank you for talking with us.

Mr. GREEN: Thank you.

ELLIOTT: You can find out more about Haymarket's legacy at our website, npr.org.

Copyright © 2006 National Public Radio. All rights reserved. No quotes from the materials contained herein may be used in any media without attribution to National Public Radio. This transcript is provided for personal, noncommercial use only, pursuant to our Terms of Use. Any other use requires NPR's prior permission. Visit our permissions page for further information.